

How are we? We're going to be in Matthew 7 today. I want to give you good news that will sound like weird good news at first, but it is good news. The Bible tells us that a man named Saul was breathing murderous threats against the church in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. In fact, after Stephen was stoned for preaching and teaching the gospel, the men and women around Jerusalem just fled, and Saul followed them. So wherever they went to preach and teach the gospel, Saul followed in an attempt to arrest and even murder in some instances those who belonged to the Way. It's not called Christianity and they're not called Christians before Antioch. Before then they're just called "the Way," which means that at one point we were marked by how we lived our lives and not necessarily what we just said we believed. So Saul gets letters from the high priest and heads to Damascus. On the way to Damascus, Jesus shows up, blinds him, knocks him off his horse and says, "Why do you persecute Me?" And Saul goes, "Who are you?" And He says, "I'm Jesus." And then Saul heads into Damascus, and God comes to another man named Ananias and says, "I want you to go heal him." And so Ananias objects like we all would and says, "Um, he's come here to kill me and my family. How about we don't heal him? How about You let me kill him?" He doesn't actually ask that, but you can think he's probably wanting to. So he argues with God a little bit and God goes, "Look, you go heal him, I'm going to show him how much he must suffer for My namesake and he's going to be an apostle of mine to the Gentiles. So go heal him." So Ananias goes and heals him, and within a few days he preaches his first sermon in the synagogue. And from that moment on, Saul is now Paul. He is the greatest missionary our faith has ever known and he wrote 75% of the New Testament. He is a tremendous man of God who walked in more power than most of us can even imagine. Let me give you an example. We pray for sick people. Paul did not pray for sick people; he told them to stop being sick. Can we agree that that's different? Somebody in our family gets sick and we're like, "Lord, please help them not be sick. Holy Spirit, heal them." That's not how Paul rolls. Paul goes in and goes, "Quit being lame. Get up and walk." He turns around to a demon filled little girl and goes, "I've had it. Get out of her." And the demon's gone. This is a man that walks in an extraordinary amount of power. In fact, the book of Acts tells us that his apron and his handkerchief would actually heal people. People would steal his clothes, rub them on sick people and they would get healed. So he also went to this place called the third heaven. He talked to Jesus face to face, he had been to the third heaven, he walked in an immense amount of power and saw converts wherever he went. I think we can just agree that this is a man of God at a varsity level.

Which brings me to Romans 7, which I think is good news. Romans 7 says this, "For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. . . Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ." Now let me tell you why I think this is a great text. It's a great text because a power, profound man of God said it. And so I don't feel like I'm an alien now, because I can say that. I can say, "Why can't I do the fullness of what I know is right? And why, when I know what is right, do I still fall into what is wrong?" If Paul can say it, then I don't feel like an alien anymore.

So then there's this kid named David, who is so overlooked that when he's in the fields and the prophet Nathan shows up to look over Jesse's sons, they don't even think to go get him. So literally he looks through all of the sons and goes, "None of these, you're missing a son." And his dad is like, "Oh yeah, David. You can't mean David. He's 12." And they run out and get David and they anoint him king and then send him back out to watch the sheep. And then during a war with the Philistines he goes to get his brothers cheese and bread and this really giant man whose name was Goliath is out there defiling the God of the Israelites. So David goes out there with a sling and kills him and cuts off his head. And then

he goes on to become the king of Israel, the golden age of Israel's existence, and he is deemed by God "a man after My own heart." But listen to what he says in Psalm 40, "For evils have encompassed me beyond number; my iniquities have overtaken me, and I cannot see." Remember a couple of weeks ago where we were talking about iniquity? Iniquity is a bent towards something. So it's not necessarily a sin although it can be. Like some people are bent towards anger. The world presses them and they respond with anger. That's an iniquity. The world presses them and they respond with lust. That's an iniquity. Some people go inside. So the world presses them and they go, "I hate myself. I'm worthless." That's an iniquity. It's a bent towards something. And David is saying, "My iniquities have overtaken me, and I cannot see; they are more than the hairs of my head." If a man after God's own heart can say, "My iniquities have overtaken me, and I cannot see," then I don't feel like such an alien.

And then there's Peter, bless his heart. I love Peter because he's so aggressive. He's a guy to run off and do what you said before you finished asking him to do it. Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit and on the day of Pentecost he preaches and instantly 3,000 men get saved. By Acts 4, 5,000 more Jewish men (8,000 total) get saved. So you're probably looking at a number around 17,000 converts to Christ in the first year of his ministry when you take into account women and children. He's doing pretty well. Gotta sign that guy to a book deal. And then this weird thing starts to happen as the church is persecuted by Judaizers who would claim that in order to become a Christian you had to become a Jew first. I'll just read it to you. In Galatians 2, Paul confronts Peter and says, "But when [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to [Peter] before them all, 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?'" Peter gets confronted with one of the oldest traps in the book – don't overly honor the wealthy, cool people. Don't overly honor those in power to the exclusion of those in need. So not only do we see that powerful men of God are tempted, but they actually fall into sin.

Now let's look at a couple of texts together. Matthew 7, we'll pick it up in verse 17, "So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits." Alright, let me try this. This text is not about trees. I see some of you who live out in the sticks who are going, "This is true." Yes it is, but it's not what we're talking about here. Here is what Jesus is teaching, and it's a difficult lesson. Good trees bear good fruit, and where they don't, they're not good trees. And diseased trees bear bad fruit and never good fruit. He's talking about the state of the soul and saying, "If the soul is regenerate, if the soul is saved, if the soul is transformed, if the soul is redeemed, there will be movement, there will be progress, there will be growth."

Now flip over to the book of James. Martin Luther, who started the great reformation away from Catholicism, called James the "epistle of straw." He hated it because he was justification by faith alone. But I think Luther just misunderstood James. Wow, I just publicly disagreed with Luther. I never thought that would happen. Look in James 2, starting in verse 22. You can see why this is going to create some tension in our faith that does not believe in works-based righteousness. "You see that faith was active along with [Abraham's] works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone." That's a problem, isn't it? We'll get to it. "And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead." Now this is a problem text, which is why Luther called it "the epistle of straw." Because the rest of the Scriptures teach that you're justified not by works but by faith alone. So the first rule of hermeneutics, the first rule of studying the Bible is that

the Scriptures must interpret the Scriptures. So if a Scripture seems to counteract the rest of the Scriptures, you've got to get in there and figure out what's going on. Here's what's going on in this text since we know that works-based righteousness is not a part of the gospel but rather contrary to the gospel. What the Scriptures are teaching here is not that works are a necessity for salvation, but rather where there is genuine salvation, there will be works. So that works or transformed life is the objective evidence of salvation. And where there is no transformation but an intellectual "I believe," you do not have legitimate faith. The Bible speaks very aggressively to this.

Flip over to Hebrews 10. We'll start in verse 26. "For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries." He's saying here, "Where you say you're a believer in Christ but deliberately stay in your sins, you get none of the benefits of the freedom of life in Christ but rather continue to operate in fear that God's going to get you because of the objective evidence that you really haven't been converted. Once again, a difficult text.

So, what do we then do with the struggle, with the temptation and the fact that we will fall into it? Does anyone actually want to argue that you don't get tempted at all and you have never fallen into it? Because if so, I need to take off my face mic and hand it to you. So we're going to acknowledge that all of us are tempted and in that temptation sometimes we fall. Okay, so what I want to talk about in our time is the wrong way to handle temptation and sin, and I want to talk about the right way to handle temptation and sin. Because biblically there's a right way to do this and there's a wrong way to do this. One's going to end very bad, one's going to end with a transformed heart, which is what we want. Here's the wrong way. The wrong way to struggle is to do the same sin over and over and over again until you just decide it's just who you are, it's just what you struggle with and God's just going to have to deal with it and that's just what you walk in. Now the motivation for that is almost always guilt. So we feel guilty, we feel shameful, we can't believe we did it again and there's no real sense of offending God, there's no understanding of belittling or mocking the God of the universe. There's just a wish that you didn't do that. Your friends, your wife, your children get angry when you do it. You wish you didn't do that. It's just guilt ridden. You just feel guilty and don't want to do that anymore. So the wrong response to the wrong motive is to try to white-knuckle it, try harder and manipulate your environment. That's how it plays out. What I'm trying to describe to you is basic, entry-level Evangelicalism. Let me read you just one verse in particular about this idea of effort and willpower. It's Romans 9:16. A lot of people don't know that Romans 9 is in the Bible. When you get a chance, read chapters 8-11. It's very intriguing reading. Here's what it says, "So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy." So the wrong way of handling the struggle is to continually operate in the same sin over and over again is to feel guilty about it and then with willpower try to overcome it.

And then there's another piece here. The mode of repentance in this state is always trying harder, trying harder, trying harder. Paul mocks this idea all the time. One of my favorites is Galatians 3. In it he says, "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" He's saying, "So you didn't do anything to come into a saving knowledge of Christ. He opened up your heart, He opened up your mind, He opened up your spirit and saved you by the Spirit, not by any works of your own. So why now are you trying to fix yourself?" Okay, so here is what I'll just lovingly call "the cycle of doom." Here we go. We come to know the Lord, we become believers and there's this thing that is a little bit more difficult than we originally thought. So we do it and feel guilty, and so we go, "I'm never going to do that again." And depending on what type of person you are, you last anywhere from seven minutes to a few months to a year. But eventually you do it again. Now at this moment, you completely run from God to go fix yourself. "Oh, I blew it again. God must hate me.

Let me go fix myself." And so there you are again with "I'm never going to do it again. I'm not going to do it." And you just get crazy. Type A people make up an outline of all the steps of delivering yourself from your sin. Some of you who aren't disciplined just go crazy and do things like throw your computer away, catch your car on fire or whatever you have

to do to stop yourself. Maybe you cut off your hand, take the text literal. And you go, "Whatever I've got to do I'm going to stop. I'm not going to do this anymore." So you're nowhere near the Lord anymore, you're over here, you're kind of manipulating, you're trying it and you do well for a while depending on your aptitude. And then what happens a lot of the time after this is people just go, "Aw, forget it," and they dive headlong into their sin. They go, "Forget it. I'm not going to try anymore. I'm just diving straight into it." Because I guess other voices get in their head and they think that diving into that is somehow going to make the angst that they feel in their heart about their sin disappear. But it's not going to. You just enter into another level of lying to yourself. And then what will happen as good church folk is someone will give a sermon or you'll hear one or you'll come back to church and you'll go, "I'll never do that again." And that's repeated for 30 years and that's Evangelicalism.

Now let me tell you the context in which this plays itself out. Let me tell you who else is involved in this game. The context of the wrong struggle with the wrong motive with the wrong mode with the wrong system, the context that this plays out in – men and women play this game all by themselves. They convince themselves that they're doing everything they can to combat this, but nobody else knows they're struggling, they have not taken advantage of counseling, they have not taken advantage of recovery, they have not taken advantage of other godly people in their lives. So they lie to themselves that they've tried everything despite the fact that they're honestly tried nothing. Or maybe one time they just came clean to some buddies. Now let me tell you the result that you get in that cycle. I think you'll get two things. You'll get religious repentance. That's where those of you who have the strength to white-knuckle behavior will just become self-righteous and worthless. You will have no grace for anyone else who struggles. In fact, you will have animosity for anyone who struggles, because you have been able to control your flesh. So you'll become a worthless, self-righteous piece of junk. I was just using Jesus' language. Please don't get upset at me. You're not any better off spiritually than the sinners you hate. Or you end up getting worldly sorrow, which just means you hate yourself and shame builds on shame builds on shame builds on shame....

I want off that ride. So what's the right way to struggle? The right way is to struggle with temptation, sometimes falling but moving in the right direction. Let me tell you what the key distinction is. Temptation is not sin. Temptation is a part of life in a fallen world. Temptation is never going away. I'll use some examples that are probably going to get me in trouble, but I don't care. This time of year is specifically difficult for men. It's difficult because it gets warmer and clothes get smaller. And just for the record, there is an inordinate amount of cleavage that comes out this time of year and forces men to stare at the ceiling, to stare at the ground, to put their seat in the corner and try to avoid the sultriness of our age. And did you know in the book of 1 Timothy God speaks directly to women on how they dress? So I'll say it this way. God cares. Now I know some of you are saying, "No man should be telling me how to dress." I'm not telling you; I'm quoting the Bible to you. The book of 1 Timothy says that women should dress in such a way to bring attention to their beautiful face and their warm soul and not to objectify themselves to the temptation that men will give you attention based on that. That's what Paul tells the women in Ephesus. That was free. Let's get back to my point. So the temptation to look at a beautiful woman is not necessarily sinful. And I don't think God just takes it away. I've met men who struggle with lust say, "God, just take it away." Do you really want God to do that? You no longer find women attractive. Do you really want God to lift that from you. I personally do not want God to lift that from me. I like to look at my wife and go, "How good You are." I like that I find my wife attractive. So the temptation isn't removed, but in the moment of temptation, I've got a choice to lay that down, see that woman as a soul or objectify her and sin. The temptation to look is not sinful. The reality of dwelling or anything more absolutely is. So temptation and a temptation to sin isn't sin. Jesus was tempted, the book of Hebrews tells us. Hebrews 4 says that Jesus was tempted in every way so that we would have an empathetic high priest. Not only that, but one of the greatest verses in the Bible is found in 1 Corinthians 10. Look at this, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man." I love that. That means that I will be tempted by nothing that everyone else isn't also tempted by. It's not like God has a special temptation for you. We're all tempted the same way – pride, arrogance, lust, idolatry, to make things ultimate, to not trust the Lord. We're all tempted in the same way. Now why is

this such a great, great verse? Because I can look around and see the gospel working in other men and them walking in victory over what I struggle with and gain the confidence that this thing will not own me. That's good news. And then not only that, but look at the next part. "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." God's never been guilty of entrapment. "I'm going to put you in a situation in which you have no choice but to sin." No, He's going to give you a way out. This is a crucial point. I think what it means to struggle well is long obedience in the right direction. Which means our motivation to repent of sin is not guilt but an understanding that we have offended God and in that offense, God sent Jesus to die on the cross for us and that our justification in front of God alone is by the cross alone and by no act of our own merit. And that kindness, when we understand our depravity that we've sinned against Him and His response has been the cross, that leads us to repentance.

The right means to repent, grace. Can I be real honest with you? I'm reformed in theology, but for the most part I can't stand the reformed community. What an arrogant bunch of fools. How can a doctrine built on the total depravity of man and God's grace in that depravity lead people to be so arrogant, insidious and attacking? It grieves my heart greatly. The means to repent are grace and community, biblical truth, all these things. Now, if the wrong mode is white-knuckled discipline, what's the right mode? It's not trying harder. Let's do it this way. I cannot play the piano. I can play the high part to "Heart and Soul." I can't play the lower part with two hands. I can also play, "Knuckles." I can do the full slide up and down. That's my repertoire. Now what if you came up and put a Beethoven piece in front of me and said, "Play it." I would ask, "Is this Beethoven's 'Knuckles?'" No matter how hard I tried, no matter how aggressive or sincere I was, I can't play that piece. It does not matter how much angst I work up, it doesn't matter how hard I slam my fingers into those keys, I can't play the piece. It doesn't matter how angry my wife is that I can't play the piece, it doesn't matter how disappointed my children are that I can't play the piece, it doesn't matter how everyone else could sit down and rip that thing out if they wanted to, none of that matters. I can't play the piece. . . unless someone sits down with me and starts to train me, starts to teach me, slowly but surely "here's where you put your hands...here's where your feet go...here what the chords are...here's the A...here's the A-flat...here's the B..." And depending on my aptitude (which musically is not a good thing), anywhere from six months to many years, even decades, I'm going to be able to play Beethoven. Now none of my kids play instruments yet, thank God. And that's not because I'm anti music, because I love music, love the arts. I really hope both of my kids pick up an instrument. But I just remember my older sister learning how to play the clarinet and asking God to kill me. But then what happened? She's playing. And it sounds bad at first, but then all of a sudden I was like, "Hey, is that a note? I think I heard a note." Yeah, it's training. This is what Paul even commands of Timothy. "Train yourself in godliness." This isn't a try harder deal; this is a training deal. It's why we take advantage of any opportunity we have to be trained. It's why we do things like Recovery, why we go to home groups, why we confess our sins to one another, why we find older, godly men and say, "Teach me. How do I do this?" It's why we go to counseling. It's discipleship. It's training. I'm constantly perplexed at the belief that you're going to stumble into godliness, that you're accidentally going to get there. We've covered this a thousand times. The Greek word is *gymnasia*. It's the Greek word for sweat. We train into godliness, it doesn't just happen. Okay, so what's the context that all this plays out in? It's easy...community. Let me give you James 5:16. "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." Do you know how this ends? Transformed lives. If you remember back to last week, it's life without regret. Okay, so I'm sixteen years in now. Early on, I had count keys to know exactly where the A key was on the piano. But now I know exactly where to put my hands. I just know where the A key is. I don't have to think about it, I don't have to wrestle with it. It's just there. I know where the A key is. Now there are some new pieces that could be put in front of me that can cause me problems, but I'm not where I was sixteen years ago. What's happened? Progressive sanctification, training in righteousness. What you get is transformed lives, which is what we're all after.

Okay, two things. 1) Our deep desire here at the Village is to train you in righteousness. That's what everything we do here is about. 2) This is a big question that I want to answer because I believe this is where a lot of us are. What do you do when your mind is there but your heart isn't? What do you do when you know what sin is, you know what's right, you know what's wrong, you know what you need to be doing vs. what you don't need to be doing, your mind knows but your heart isn't there yet? So you don't feel remorse over your sin even though you know something is sin. What do you do when there's a gap between your head and your heart? This brings us to a biblical idea that is not pleasant but somehow in 2009 has become a very cute idea. Throughout the Scriptures there's this phrase. It's just a nightmare little phrase. "Wait on the Lord." So like everyone loves the Isaiah one. They put it on a coffee cup with an eagle and it says, "Those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint." We've got that on our plate or a really horrible t-shirt. Waiting on the Lord isn't pleasant at all. In fact, in one of the most gut-wrenching psalms in the Bible, Psalm 42, David is literally in a fight with himself. "Why are you cast down, O my soul? Hope in God." So his mind knows "Put your hope in God. Put your trust in God. Bow down before God. Serve God. Walk with God. Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why aren't you buying into this?" There's this disjoint between his head and his heart, and it's driving him crazy. It's why I love him. His wrestle I so appreciate. I thank God for tormenting him actually. It's really beneficial for me. So how do you wait on the Lord if this is you? You position yourself under the waterfall of grace, you put yourself in front of biblical teaching, you put yourself in community where you are honestly walking with others about where you are spiritually, maybe get into something like Recovery or biblical counseling. I hate that it's called biblical counseling. It's just discipleship on steroids. And if it's not, you shouldn't listen to their counsel. And you wait while you walk in obedience. One step at a time, one day at a time, asking for God to break your heart, asking for God to restore the joy of your salvation to you, asking God to make Him your treasure, being honest about where you are whether that be the desert or the low part or the struggle and you wait. Why? Because they who wait on the Lord, He will renew their strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles; they will run and no longer be weary; they will walk and not grow faint. So I'm not asking you if you struggle. Because if you don't think you do, you've lied to yourself to such a level that this conversation's really a moot point. I'm asking you if you're struggling well or not. Are you struggling well or are you struggling poorly? God help us, huh?

Let's pray. "Father, I thank You for our time together in this place, and I pray that You would reveal in us where we have struggled poorly. I think my hope right now is that all of us would hear Your word and think of our own lives and that we wouldn't find ourselves sitting here thinking about someone else, whether they struggle well or not. But I pray that we would look into our own hearts, into our own lives and answer the question. I thank You that You will not tempt us beyond what we can bear. I thank You that You will provide ways out. And I thank You that if we're faithful today, tomorrow's a little bit easier, until it's barely an issue at all. And so I pray that You would weigh heavy on us in this place for Your glory and our good. I pray that You would save us from mind-numbing religion that in the end would shackles us to chains instead of setting us free. Help us. It's for Your beautiful name. Amen."